

Anxiety and Salvation. A Soteriological Miniature

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Abstract: Inspired both by the phenomenological thought of Karol Tarnowski and Józef Tischner and the personalist theology of Czesław Bartnik, the article fits into contextual soteriology which deliberately uses the method of correlation. The aim of this article is to present the Christian meaning of salvation in the context of one of the most moving existential experiences, that is the experience of anxiety (*Angst*). The indelible phenomenon of anxiety raises important soteriological questions: Who or what can bring the fullness of salvation to men and women? In what circumstances is the experience of salvation possible to the human being who is called an “anxious existence”? The first part of the article shows the essential difference between anxiety and fear (in contrast to fear, the matter of anxiety is real but indeterminate). The second part presents an ambivalent character of anxiety (anxiety can lead to despair or to salvation) and human attempts to overcome anxiety through falling into an inauthentic existence (a utopia of “salvation by fashion”). The third part characterizes an “eschatological conscience” (a conscience filled with anxiety of tragic finality) and its antithesis in the form of a “soteriological conscience” (a conscience which is open to the possibility of salvation coming from God). The last part of the article argues that the phenomenon of authentic interpersonal encounter is a necessary condition to experience the salvation coming from God in Christ.

Keywords: anxiety, salvation, existence, eschatological conscience, soteriological conscience, encounter

Salvation is an important category in Christian theology, the latter understood after St. Anselm of Canterbury as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*). Contemporary soteriology, however, does not seek to create some “theory” of the Divine Savior, but has more practical aspirations. It is seeking an answer to the question: how is salvation “here and now” possible in the conditions of alienated human existence? Soteriology wants to be a credible and existentially moving interpretation of human fate in terms of God’s promise of salvation. For this reason, in contrast to scholastic approaches, it takes the form of a hermeneutic of human experience, constructed in the context of the Divine Revelation contained both in the Bible and Christian Tradition.

As a result of the hermeneutic turn, the method of correlation proposed by Paul Tillich has been gaining more and more interest in the post-conciliar theology. The method consists in the interrelation of two inseparable planes: the existential situation of man and the broadly understood Christian experience which includes both the perception and the ecclesial interpretation of the Divine Revelation in the history of Christianity. Soteriology built on the mutual correlation of the above-mentioned

aspects can become a serious response to the important problems of contemporary people: a reflection that updates the Christian message, and a thought that is close and kind to human existence immersed in a long history of suffering.

The purpose of this article is to present the Christian meaning of salvation in the context of one of the most poignant existential experiences, i.e. the experience of anxiety (*Angst*). It is impossible to reasonably consider the essence of salvation in isolation from human existence which is always tragic in a way: alienated and fearful, but at the same time constantly looking for ways to be saved. To talk about salvation without reflecting on the condition of “an anxious man” would be, to use the words of Czesław Miłosz, a tedious process of “building the stairway of abstraction.”¹

In terms of its structure and content, the article is part of the theology “from below,” which is by definition metadogmatic, aspect-oriented, anti-systemic and complementary to systematic theology. The innovative nature of the article manifests itself in the use of a contextual approach. Contrary to numerous systemic (top-down) approaches, the starting point in this article is not the analysis of the Church’s dogmatic propositions on the essence of salvation, but the interpretation of the existential experience of anxiety, on the basis of which important soteriological questions arise: Why can contemporary man be called “an anxious existence”? What is the difference between anxiety and fear? What is the “revelatory” nature of anxiety? What is the role of experiencing anxiety in the search for transcendent salvation? Why does the experience of salvation need space for a personal encounter?

Inspired both by the phenomenological thought of Józef Tischner and Karol Tar-nowski, and the personalistic theology of Czesław Bartnik, existential soteriology presented in the article tries to answer the above questions convincingly. Bringing together philosophical anthropology and theology, it can provide a valuable introduction to further detailed research in systematic soteriology. Existential thinking seems to be an ally of theology. Its addressees are contemporary alienated people. Living in the present social and cultural situation which can be called after Martin Buber “the eclipse of God,”² they are looking for salvation.

1. Fear and Anxiety as the Context for Contemporary Soteriology

In the exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, John Paul II indicated numerous phenomena characteristic of our era, both positive and negative. Among the disturbing “signs of the times” (*signa temporis*) he indicated the phenomenon of modern man’s fear of the future. According to the pope, the main cause of this fear is the loss of Christian

¹ Miłosz, *Poezje*, 318.

² See: Buber, *Eclipse of God*.

memory, manifested in abandoning the heritage of faith. It necessarily leads to practical agnosticism, religious and moral indifference, spiritual emptiness and sorrow caused by the squandering of Christian heritage handed down in history.

The vision of the future is colorless and uncertain, and as a result, people are afraid of the future more than they actually want it. In pope's description of the negative "signs of the times" there is a conviction about the actual fragmentation of human existence, about the domination of the feeling of loneliness despite prosperity, about increasing interpersonal divisions, as well as ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, about the escalation of racist attitudes, and about the disappearance of solidarity in favor of the absolutization of selfish individualism, which leads to the isolation of individuals and groups concerned only with their own interests and privileges. Among the numerous factors causing the fear of the future, John Paul II points to the ambivalent phenomenon of globalization, which, instead of supporting the longed-for unity of humanity, may, contrary to expectations, lead to the marginalization of the weak and the ever greater pauperization of societies.³

The concept of fear appears in the papal interpretation of the human condition (*conditio humana*), referring to specific phenomena that can be identified, explained and classified. The numerous "faces of fear" correspond to particular negative events, situations, actions and/or tendencies that might be considered as direct or indirect causes of fear instilled in humans. It seems that the removal or a significant reduction of the impact of a given cause will translate directly into the elimination of some forms of fear which plague modern humanity.

Referring to some aspects of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, contextual soteriology makes an essential distinction between fear (*Furcht*) and anxiety (*Angst*). While fear relates to something particular, anxiety always relates to the totality of being. Both fear and anxiety have their real object: some "about" or "for something." The essential difference, however, is that the object of anxiety, as opposed to fear, is characterized by indeterminacy: it is the whole world that becomes completely indefinite, that is, it loses all substance and meaning. Man is anxious about the world as such.⁴ Heidegger says, "The world in which I exist has sunk into insignificance; and the world which is thus disclosed is one in which entities can be freed only in the character of having no involvement."⁵ Anxiety is a typically human reality, available only to man as part of his existential experience. It does not come to him from the outside, but is an inherent element of human existence. Søren Kierkegaard wrote that "Because [a person] is a synthesis [of the infinite and the finite], he can be in anxiety; and the more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man – yet not in

³ Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, no. 8. On the meaning of time in Christian theology see also: Barth, "Czas w teologii," 368–371.

⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 394–395.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 393.

the sense usually understood, in which anxiety is about something external, about something outside a person, but in the sense that he himself produces the anxiety.”⁶

According to Heidegger, anxiety is the basic human mood, along with astonishment and boredom. By mood he means a certain primal and permanent state-of-mind that in general makes it possible to experience reality as such. Human existence is in its essence “being-in-the-world” (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) and at the same time “being-with” others (*Mitsein*).⁷ Hence, mood is the basic type of human openness to the entire world. It is man’s constant disposition towards the totality of being, and a way of opening the human being (*Dasein*) to reality. Thanks to anxiety, man is confronted with the bare fact of his own existence and with the fact of the existence of a world that is different from the human being. However, it should be remembered that, contrary to popular understanding, the world, according to Heidegger, is not an ordinary set of all things, but a whole system of references that define the being of all that is. In this unconventional approach, the world is the being of all things: it is what makes all things possible at all.⁸

It should be emphasized that anxiety has the ability only to reveal nothingness. It has no power to generate nothingness. Man is anxious about the world understood as a total being (totality of things) which always “evades” and “slips from” him. Hence, anxiety withdraws from the world understood as the totality of connections of all that is. In a situation of anxiety, man is somehow suspended in his usual relation to the world. The relation consists in encountering a specific being that is convenient and possible to control and to use. This being is already predetermined. It has its sense and significance as a thing in the midst of an infinite and diverse multiplicity of beings. Anxiety makes man experience the world in its entirety as nothingness, i.e. as something that ceases to be obvious and thus loses all meaning.⁹

Revealing the world’s nothingness through anxiety does not mean the negation of being; it merely shows its indeterminacy. An anxious being loses its footing in a world that turns out to be fragile and insignificant. Being within the world no longer has any meaning for man, and the world as a whole collapses within itself, ceasing to be a safe place. Consequently, anxiety is powerless in the face of the totality of the world and withdraws from it. However, this withdrawal is not a desperate escape, but is characterized by a kind of “preserved calm” which makes it possible to reveal nothingness along with being in its entirety.¹⁰

While Heidegger believes that anxiety reveals the nothingness of the world, Kierkegaard argues that anxiety reveals distinct possibilities that freedom offers to man. Contrary to popular belief, however, possibility is a category heavier than

6 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 155.

7 Stapleton, “Dasein as Being-in-the-World,” 44–56.

8 Michalski, “Heidegger: filozof i czas,” 62, 56–69.

9 Łojek, “Co ujawniają nastroje?” 42.

10 Łojek, “Co ujawniają nastroje?” 41.

reality. The power of possibility combined with freedom can lead to complete dominance over the individual, especially in the case of people without integrity and faith. The power of human possibility is terrifying. Consequently, anxiety about possibilities turns out to be more powerful than the anxiety about people or other finitenesses. It is similar to a web man is drawn into. Salvation can only take place when anxiety brings man to faith understood here in Hegelian terms as “an inner certainty that anticipates infinity.”¹¹ In Kierkegaard’s interpretation, anxiety resembles a teacher bringing up a pupil who is constantly consumed with a sense of guilt. Anxiety without faith leads inevitably to drowning in the misery of the finite. However, if joined with faith, it can even become a means of salvation, and a guide on the way leading to “repose in Providence.”¹²

2. Ambivalence of Anxiety and Attempts to Desensitize Fears

Being flooded with information about numerous dangers provokes three basic reactions in modern people: (1) denial of the existence of threats, (2) escape into an inauthentic way of being, or (3) bold adoption of an authentic way of being. The first reaction is expressed in the persistent denial of the factual reality that threatens man with the loss of life, blocking personal development or an extreme decline in the field of morality and axiology. Denial of the threats leads to a state of apparent peace that requires man to be constantly in a state of illusion. People who suppress the truth about dangers reach the level of infantile perception of reality, in which even the most tragic events are perceived as irreducible elements of the adventure of life, the latter identified with a fairy tale.

The second reaction consists in allaying fears and silencing existential anxiety, which are served by what Heidegger called the inauthentic way of being a man *thrown into the world*. The concept of throwing indicates a situation in which man finds himself regardless of his will.¹³ Inauthentic being is expressed in a specific dispersion of the human being in the sphere of one’s duties, acts and activities, as well as in being influenced in one’s judgments by the general public opinion. The inauthentic way of being is fostered by the broadly understood influence of other – human and non-human – factors that lead to a situation in which human life is lived somehow outside himself, in a mindless submission to the imposed patterns.¹⁴ On the linguistic level, the inauthentic way of being is expressed by the (reflexive) pronoun

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 157.

¹² Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 161.

¹³ Piecuch, “Mistrz Heidegger,” 117.

¹⁴ Piecuch, “Mistrz Heidegger,” 124.

“one(self)” or “it” (*das Man*). The inauthentic way of being is therefore manifested by such expressions as “one does/it is done,” “one works/it is worked,” “one thinks that/it is thought that,” etc. In an inauthentic state, man lives not as he would like to, but as “one lives/it is lived” in the circle of others.¹⁵ As a result, man becomes more and more unlike himself in his existence, i.e. he becomes a being without properties, and more of a copy than an original. Under the influence of “one/it” (*das Man*), which is the fundamental aspect of human existence and the source phenomenon belonging to the human being (*Dasein*), man’s sense of responsibility becomes blurred. An autonomous and responsible act of an individual is then reduced to an inauthentic manner of acting according to patterns imposed by society, party, clan, criminal group, or political correctness. Individual responsibility is replaced with collective responsibility. It leads to “the real dictatorship of the *they*.”¹⁶

One of the factors that aim to desensitize fears by reinforcing an inauthentic way of being is *fashion*. Supported by the power of advertising, it is one of the most dynamic and seductive phenomena.¹⁷ Due to the unstoppable sequence of self-propelling changes, fashion is sometimes compared to a “perpetual motion machine” (*perpetuum mobile*). It effectively introduces the mad rush for constant change into the life of modern societies. Fashion creates awareness in which any attempt to uniform clothes, ways of thinking, creating and behaving, is sometimes perceived as the greatest danger to social life. Many researchers claim that fashion perfectly reflects the features of modern culture, such as pace, changeability and temporariness (cf. Wojciech Burszta, Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, Anthony Giddens, Lars Svendsen, Tomáš Halík).

As observed by Georg Simmel, the increasing speed of fashion development is powered by the painful confrontation of two opposing needs: security consisting in the unification of an individual with a specific social group, and individualization consisting in separating an individual from the human mass.¹⁸ The tension between the desire to be like others and the striving for uniqueness generates powerful social emotions, triggers the fever of having the most fashionable things and leads to the obsession with change. The obsession with getting rid of what is already obsolete, in favor of what is the newest, constitutes in modern people a strong will to power, which pushes individuals into following blindly the avant-garde of fashion, giving rise to the compulsion to be trendy at all costs. The exhausting pursuit of fashion seems to be a therapeutic utopia in today’s society metaphorically referred to as “hunter society.”¹⁹ However, it does not solve people’s problems, but only temporarily desensitizes suffering, making people sad slaves of the present.

15 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149–150.

16 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164.

17 See: Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, *Zarys poetyki uwodzenia*.

18 Simmel, “The Philosophy of Fashion,” 187–206.

19 Bauman, *Kultura w płynnej nowoczesności*, 37–42.

Unlike earlier utopias which promise rest and happiness after life's hardships and sacrifices, modern utopia professed by the "consumer society" does not foreshadow any end to effort or journey, but boldly announces the endlessness of human action to solve the painful problems of the human condition. It does not offer a cure for social ills in the distant future, but perversely suggests the possibility of achieving happiness in the present: in endless "hunts" aimed at acquiring things promoted by fashion designers.²⁰ The utopia of "salvation through fashion" is extremely dangerous, as it leads people into the trap of participation in endless games. It forces them to run in a race without the finishing line; and finally, it justifies a selfish lifestyle in which ruthless competition becomes the main rule of conduct. The illusion of happiness promised in the never-ending pursuit keeps today's "bargain hunters" from giving up on their utopian venture. Pulling out of the race would be perceived by other participants as a cowardly desertion and would lead to social exclusion. The price for remaining in the system of chasing fashion amounts to the loss of the ability to pose fundamental questions about the meaning of life, the effects of existential alienation caused by sin, the possibility of temporal and eternal salvation, and finally about the way of meeting the Divine Savior in the conditions of existential alienation.

The third human reaction to threats and dangers consists in trying to be authentic in the world. Authenticity takes the truth about human mortality seriously. It requires courage to think about death understood by Heidegger as "the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all."²¹ "Being-towards-death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*) is a continual rush (*Vorlaufen*) towards loss (*Vorbei*), i.e. heading towards the inevitable possibility of death, which is the most personal, absolute and ultimate.²² While for Levinas the being of a human is a being against the violence of death and a way to evade death in its closeness, for Heidegger "being-towards-death" is a being towards nothingness that causes anxiety.²³ The experience of anxiety as the basic mood of a man *thrown-into-the-world* is an opportunity to reflect on the truth revealed in this experience. Anxiety enables insight into the truth about oneself. It conditions the discovery of the phenomenon of freedom, the originality of which consists in the fact that man can choose himself. He has the ability to constantly go beyond himself, to design the possibilities of both his own being and the being of things encountered in the world. In anxiety, man realizes the burden of freedom: that it is identical with the burden of his own being from which he wants to escape. The escape, which consists in departing from the possibility of "being oneself," leads to an attitude of everyday inauthenticity. It is an existential movement of falling (*Verfallen*) into mediocrity.²⁴

²⁰ Bauman, *Kultura w płynnej nowoczesności*, 43–44.

²¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 307.

²² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 294.

²³ Mech, "Heidegger i Levinas o śmierci," 145.

²⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 264.

Experiencing anxiety, man learns the truth of his own being, which is the experience of his own contingency. In a moment of anxiety, all ties with the world are severed and man can discover the importance of being thus far experienced as a void, i.e. a lack of a sense of objective meaning that would support and fill this being. Anxiety reveals to man the fact that in the encounter with nothingness, he discovers himself as a creative being. Something may arise in him, as it were, out of nothingness, but at the same time, every possibility may turn into nothingness. It is anxiety that reveals the fundamental alternative: the actualization of possibilities or their annihilation.²⁵

The ambiguity of existential anxiety is expressed in the fact that man can either accept the state of his original “metaphysical homelessness” and remain faithful to it, or he can constantly seek an escape from himself.²⁶ Anxiety in itself is morally indifferent and ambivalent. It can awaken or put to sleep human desire to go beyond the state of tragic reality. Recognizing the truth that “being-in-the-world” (*Dasein*) is “being-towards-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*), man can, however, freely accept his finitude, temporality, changeability and mortality, without having to negate the possibility of discovering the transcendent meaning that comes to us as salvation-from-God. Since all human being is permeated with both life and continuous dying, death should no longer be understood as an event at the end of life. It is rather the end of temporality which deeply penetrates and shapes human being. The experience of transience, of the fragility of our being and of the irreversibility of the passing time, raises the fundamental question about the meaning of our being. Is it, as suggested by Heidegger, the temporality of our being? Can an anxious human existence accept more than the inevitable possibility of one’s own death? Can man open himself to the possibility/hope of meeting the Divine Savior who brings liberation from the state of despair caused by a growing sense of anxiety and fear?

If we assume that anxiety can be experienced by man as an existential shock, then guided by the principle of bias-free thinking, we should not exclude *a priori* the possibility of the transgression of purely naturalistic interpretations concerning the fragility of our being. Theistic interpretation of one’s own finitude opens to thinking in the spirit of hope, allowing man to escape from himself to the absolute possibility of *salvation-in-God*. We cannot definitely deny that in specific situations – referred to by Karl Jaspers as borderline – human spirit will begin to listen to the subtle voice that comes from the depths of human conscience but has its ultimate source in the absconding God (*Deus absconditus*). If it is true that anxiety prompts us to listen carefully to the voice of conscience, then it cannot be ruled out that a person may make a decision to seek transcendent meaning of life beyond what has been called the temporality of human existence. Perhaps in the shocking experience of anxiety,

²⁵ Piecuch, “Mistrz Heidegger,” 124.

²⁶ Piecuch, “Mistrz Heidegger,” 126.

a thought similar to the psalmist's confession will appear in the mind of a modern man: "God is our shelter, our strength, ever ready to help in time of trouble, so we shall not be afraid when the earth gives way, when mountains tumble into the depths of the sea" (Ps 46:3).

3. From "Eschatological" to "Soteriological" Conscience

Influenced by knowledge of contemporary threats, people develop "eschatological conscience." It is manifested, as claimed by Karol Tarnowski, in the feeling of losing the meaning of existence, in an acute experience of uncertainty and in fear of the victory of axiological nihilism, the vision of which hovers over human projects both in professional and everyday life. "Eschatological conscience" is associated with experiencing fear in the face of unimaginable destruction caused by the possibility of total annihilation, for instance, nuclear war, natural disasters, climate change, mass terrorism, pandemics, global hunger or lack of drinking water. The adjective "eschatological" used in the above expression indicates the possibility of a conscience oriented towards an undefined finality which is unfavorable for man and the natural environment, deadly for individuals and entire nations, and destructive to any aspect of reality (material, biological, mental, spiritual, cultural, ethical, axiological, or religious). The fear of specific threats turns into the anxiety over a vague sinister finality. Life with the irremovable view of the impending "final tragedy" escalates the anxiety which threatens to weaken man's ability to understand himself as "freedom towards values."²⁷

Eschatological fear triggers a specific anthropological turn. The vision of man as a relatively free person, created in the image and likeness of God, is easily replaced with the concept of a man who is absolutely determined, subjected to the power of fate, and given over to capricious idols, such as power, fashion, technology, market, bureaucracy or ideology. At the same time, the sense of responsibility for the repair of the world that is doomed to inevitable destruction disappears. The meaning of human creativity aimed at a positive transformation of the world is radically questioned by the ambiguous concept of life as a Sisyphian task, in which absurdity and happiness embrace each other, and every human fate can be overcome with contempt.²⁸ In the language of traditional theology, the fear of eschatological catastrophe leads to the weakening of faith in the providential presence of God in the world, hope

²⁷ Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendencja*, 75–77.

²⁸ See: Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

for the victory of grace over sin, and love as an unselfish gift of self to others. Loneliness, evil and selfishness then begin to dominate human existence.

“Eschatological conscience” is related to the experience of man’s fragility, both in the ontic and axiological aspect. The threat of a total catastrophe extending over human existence does not nullify the good that exists in the world, nor does it extrapolate evil to the whole of reality, but only indicates the reality’s contingency, fragility, destructibility, non-obviousness, ambiguity, and conditionality. In the situation of fear and anxiety, a specific paradox of fragility and power becomes more and more visible. Despite the impressive development of technology that confirms the power of intellect, will and deed, man is still susceptible to injury, endangered in the aspect of existence and realization of values, and wandering in the elements of falsehood, evil and ugliness. Weakness and power seem incompatible. However, they are not necessarily condemned to hostile separation. In Christian understanding, they form a dialectical polar structure. Within this framework, weakness is seen as an indispensable condition and the background for the manifestation of power. It is perceived as the environment for the growth of the power of good that overcomes evil, and finally as a fertile field for seeding the creative power of God’s grace. This paradoxical dynamics was expressed by St. Paul in the concise statement: “My power is at its best in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

Being aware of the evil threatening human existence does not have to result in a decadent vision of the world. It can lead, *contra spem*, to the interpretation of human fate from the perspective of good, to the affirmation and multiplication of which a person feels called upon by the *synderesis* rule (good should be done and evil avoided). As part of the basic desire for good, man discovers, thanks to the intuition, the primal fact of being endowed by a Good greater than himself. The world, one’s own being, the loved ones, and the cosmos seem to be the reality given, and freely received, in an incomprehensible act of the most generous donation.²⁹

Faced with the experience of the gift, man comes to the conclusion that before he himself achieved the possibility of choosing a particular good, he had already been chosen by the Absolute Good, which is called the Triune God of Love in the personalistic language of Christian faith. Hence, human existence, anxious about the possibility of the final destruction, does not have to fall into nihilism that denies all values because of the possibility of their annihilation or replacement by anti-values. To be able to cease to exist at any moment in time does not therefore mean to be worthless. Man is not doomed to the apotheosis of nothingness in order to absolutize a hedonistic lifestyle, affirm the will to power, or justify the desire to control people and things.

Feeling anxious about the possibility of death (be that physical, social, or spiritual), man can open up to the metaphysical dimension, i.e. transcend, like Abraham,

²⁹ Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendentja*, 64.

his factual nature towards something/someone unknown. He is able to question the axiological desert of his own existence and decide to go beyond himself in search of sources of authentic life. The moment of self-transcendence can be called the beginning of the *exodus* of people enslaved by eschatological fear towards the promised land abound with the Divine generosity, freedom and peace. The beginning of the existential movement towards a fuller being is an expression of the deepest dream of a happy life, in which “Love and Loyalty now meet, Righteousness and Peace now embrace” (Ps 85:11). It is, above all, the effect of the mysterious work of the Giver of Life, who in the Christian tradition has been called the effective Intercessor (*Parakletos/Paraclete*).

It seems that a new system of entrustment is born in the *kairos* of the Divine inquiry into the existential misery of man. Heidegger’s proposal to trust only one’s own being and assume the role of a “shepherd” of one’s own being is confronted with Christ’s call to “put out into deep water” (Luke 5:4) and follow the “Good Shepherd” on the paths of human existence. Trusting oneself is not enough. Hence, it is replaced by the highest act of trust in the Savior. Human trust in Christ is a response to the words of his promise: “anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; he will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Existential concern for being rises to a higher level: to that of caring for salvation, that is, for life “to the full” (John 10:10). In this way, the illusion of self-salvation is overcome, an existential awakening occurs, and there is a feeling of the approaching *kairos*: “Well, now is the favorable time; this is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). As a result, anxious man matures to the decision to go out to meet the Messiah who comes from God, and who brings salvation understood as liberation from the bondage of sin and as healing from existential wounds. The hope of saving an alienated, enslaved and anxious man is born anew.

The dreaded “eschatological conscience” is touched in its desperate helplessness by the healing “soteriological conscience,” that is, by the firm conviction that salvation is possible even when purely calculative thinking leads man to a critical level of unbelief in both the possibility of change and its meaning. The very process of healing the anxious conscience is, however, long and complicated, because the experience of the real power of evil in the history of the world has resulted, as noticed by Tarnowski, in the stereotypical thinking about the necessary connection between evil and strength, and in associating good with weakness. Such thinking has become a source of extremely pessimistic visions of the world (late Max Scheler, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche), in which the existence of evil seems more real than the existence of good, and doing evil seems much easier than doing good.³⁰ Although the evil will to destroy values can lead to the enslavement of many human minds by means of an obsession with the irrational fight against the good, historical experience shows that there will always be people who manifest the heroic spirit of

³⁰ Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendencja*, 65.

rebellion and opposition to the tyranny of evil, to the absurd pseudo-culture promoting the alliance of evil with the will to reign, and to the attempts to justify negative liberty which is completely detached from truth and goodness. Such individuals can also appear in our era, in which the death of a culture based on sacrifice has been announced, as suggested by Gilles Lipovetsky.³¹

In the existential situation described above, human longing for the manifestation of the absolute power of good comes to the fore. It has nothing to do with the trivialization of evil, nor with the desire to retaliate for the wrongs suffered. The longing also does not want the “tyranny of good” to be imposed on man against his will. Instead, it is connected with the desire to meet, see and hear the living God, who is not only Good in Himself, i.e. transcendent, ineffable, and superior to being, but above all, who makes Himself known in the history of human existence as a good and benevolent Father. While the awareness of the eschatological threat strengthens people’s sense of fear and anxiety about the destructive power of evil, “soteriological conscience” evokes hope for salvation, for the final victory of good, truth, love, holiness and mercy, thanks to the liberating presence of God in the history of the world. It is a subtle and, at the same time, the most credible hope because it is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in which the believers participate through the sacraments. It is a hope constantly animated by the work of the Holy Spirit, who initiates and supports the cooperation of people of good will with the saving grace of God, the Father generous with his mercy (Eph 2:4). While in the light of anxiety people can see the “nothingness” of the world and their own being, in the rays of soteriological hope Christians can already *hic et nunc* rejoice in the Lord’s reign because, to some fragmentary but real extent, piles of evil accumulated in history “melt like wax at the coming of the Master of the world,” and “shame on those who worship images, who take pride in their idols” (Ps 97:5,7).

4. Salvation and the “Sacrament” of Encounter

Hope for salvation, awakened in man in the context of existential threat, always remains fragile, and prone to the temptation of both passivity and practical unbelief. While passivity can be an ally of despair, unbelief becomes the mentor for naturalistic interpretations of the world. Therefore, the hope of being saved by God requires the support of genuine witnesses of salvation. Surrounded by numerous ideological propositions, contemporary man easily becomes a “master of suspicion” in relation to all theoretical soteriological projects. By participating in the “carnival of ideology,” the alienated man of the postmodern era slowly loses the ability to think in terms of

³¹ Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide*, 327–328.

truth and falsehood, good and evil, guilt and responsibility. Replacing both the idea and the sense of guilt with various ideological phrases, such as “we are all guilty” or “everyone is responsible for the whole world” (Jean-Paul Sartre), inevitably leads, as Leszek Kołakowski warns, to blurring the meaning of guilt and responsibility. Meanwhile, the ability to feel guilty is not only a condition for being human, but also a condition for the art of distinguishing good from evil, and a condition for conversion (*metanoia*) and ultimately salvation.³²

Contemporary people are looking for witnesses of salvation, that is, reliable subjects saved from existential oppression, who will confirm the realism of *salvation-from-God-in-Christ* proclaimed by Christian Churches. According to Tarnowski, authentic encounters with the witnesses of salvation play an important role in the act of opening up to the possibility of rising from existential failures,³³ for the testimony seems to speak more emphatically than any metaphysical speculation. Who are these witnesses of salvation? They are good people, that is, people who in the history of their lives have experienced, not without pain and hardship, the existential Passover, that is, the transition from “the horrible pit” and “the slough of the marsh” (Ps 40:3) to the land of the liberating presence of the transcendent Good. They are those who “walk in Yahweh’s presence in the land of the living” (Ps 116:9) and prefer to “stand on the steps of God’s house” because it “is better than living with the wicked” (Ps 84:11). In other words, the witnesses of salvation are aware of the need for constant *metanoia*. They are brave followers of Jesus who “went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38).

In the light of the above statements, it is easy to see that the phenomenological category of encounter can be applied in theological soteriology. It will be helpful in exploring the community dimension of salvation, in contrast to the extremely individualistic and spiritualistic misconceptions. But what is the encounter itself? A real encounter, according to Józef Tischner, does not mean a simple perception of the world, people, objects, events, or phenomena, but consists in seeing another person in the context of the tragedy that permeates all ways of being. The aforementioned tragic situation means a situation in which the well-being of a person may be in some way endangered.³⁴ The encounter is not based on the mere fact of being in an anonymous crowd, nor is it constituted in the wide spaces of shopping centers where the principle of “polite indifference” applies. In a deeper sense, encounter means establishing a dialogical relationship between people capable of taking responsibility for one another. Responsibility is understood here as a response to being addressed by another, who, within the framework of a direct “me-and-you”

³² Kołakowski, *Chrześcijaństwo*, 35; Kołakowski, *Jezus ośmieszony*, 26.

³³ Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendencja*, 66.

³⁴ Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości*, 512.

relationship, becomes a call for us and a categorical obligation at the same time.³⁵ Responsibility requires commitment and mutual trust in one another in complete freedom. Tarnowski claims that, in the space of a real encounter, man experiences the light of good, which enables him to perceive the hierarchy of values. Experienced good, together with beauty and love, not only enlightens human existence, but also draws man to itself and, to some extent, “seizes” him for itself.³⁶

True interpersonal encounters can, under certain conditions, even acquire the status of “sacramental,” that is, they may become signs that indicate and make present the authentic bond of love which, in the light of Christian faith, has its source in God. It is worth remembering that the risen Christ, as emphasized by Edward Schillebeeckx, is the basic and paradigmatic sacrament of encounter with God.³⁷ As the sole mediator of salvation from God, Christ remains forever both a personal model and a condition for the effectiveness of all human encounters, in which the liberating power of God’s salvation is revealed and results in the transformation of man affected by the various effects of alienation.

The phenomenon called by Karol Tarnowski “the radiation of goodness” is clearly visible in authentic encounters based on dialogue and mutual responsibility.³⁸ It is connected with the very nature of good, which aims to communicate itself to other people as widely as possible and, in a secondary way, to extend onto non-personal beings. The good flowing from the righteous or saints takes on the value of a testimony. It is a subtle confirmation of the power of Christ’s resurrection, which positively transforms numerous complicated ways of human being. Encounters with the witnesses of salvation, due to the truth about the real work of the Divine Savior, are shocking events in their essence, not so much in an emotional, but rather in ontological and axiological sense. They throw people out of a state of existential stagnation, question their previous habits and expose morally questionable compromises. They release and actualize various possibilities, desires and longings often hidden in the depths of human existence. They are an appeal to human freedom. Authentic encounters do not exert any pressure to act, but rather inspire people to seek a transcendent source of salvation. They consolidate responsibility blurred by the existential anxiety over the possibility of death and over the nothingness of the world in its totality. They invoke basic aspects of responsibility indicated by Roman Ingarden, which include: bearing and taking on responsibility, as well as accountability and responsible action.³⁹

Therefore, it is not difficult to see that real, deep, interpersonal encounters are creative. They serve to build a community of people (*communio personarum*) ready

35 Filek, *Filozofia odpowiedzialności XX wieku*, 11.

36 Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendencja*, 59.

37 See: Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*.

38 Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcendencja*, 61.

39 Ingarden, *Książeczka o człowieku*, 73–74.

to engage in the work of multiplying good in the world. In this way, they promote the belief that salvation, understood as an experience of liberating good, is already to some extent possible within temporality. Authentic encounters become a source of possible transformations in the pessimistic culture of skepticism because, as Karol Tarnowski claims, “in the rays of good, our entire existence changes and becomes an announcement of true being.”⁴⁰

Two important questions arise from the mood of anxiety about annihilation and fear of the future: Who can save man? Under what conditions can man meet the Savior? First question implies the belief that there is someone ready to make the highest sacrifice to save human life (physical, spiritual, moral, and social); in other words, to give one’s body and blood “for the life of the world” (John 6:51). The second question, on the other hand, assumes the possibility of meeting the Savior in the conditions of an alienated human existence, and establishing a lasting personal relationship with Him, a relationship based on the values of love, trust, cooperation and solidarity.

In response to the above questions, theological soteriology emphasizes that a non-personal reality, for instance, a thing, anonymous energy, soulless structure, idea, or gnosis, cannot be an agent of salvation. It can only be a person: a conscious, rational, selflessly loving subject, capable of a free act of sacrifice and giving one’s own life to save man. Salvation does not have a material (reistic) dimension, but rather a personal (personalistic) one. It takes place *in sensu stricto* in the personal sphere, taking the form of a historical drama in which God’s, angelic and human persons play their roles. As Czesław Bartnik emphasizes, “the Father is the end of salvation, the Son of God is the historical realization, and the Holy Spirit is the inner dimension.”⁴¹ From a personalistic perspective, salvation is associated with the dynamic process of personal optimization, i.e. with the creation of human beings by God (*creatio personarum continua*). It takes place in three stages: the creation of the person in nature (*creatio*), the salvation of the person in history (*salus*) and the fulfillment of the person in the Holy Trinity (*finalizatio*).⁴² The expectation of a total salvation from non-personal realities, such as knowledge, technology, culture, politics, economy, or artificial intelligence, would be associated with an idolatrous attempt to deify the matter, and with a derogatory submission to idols of a lower ontic status than man.

Bartnik notes that in some ancient cultures and religions, e.g. Sumerian, Egyptian, or Chinese, salvation was expected from exceptional individuals: heroes, kings, chiefs, or mythical demigods, who were to perform great acts providing rescue, prosperity or blessing. Judaism, on the other hand, links salvation with the liberating

⁴⁰ Tarnowski, *Człowiek i transcencja*, 68.

⁴¹ Bartnik, “Medytacja,” 185.

⁴² Bartnik, “Medytacja,” 185–186.

and providential act of the one God (Yahweh), who, under the concluded covenant, remains with his chosen people throughout history in a relationship based on trust, faithfulness and love (shepherd-and-sheep, father-and-children, bridegroom-and-bride).⁴³ Faith in the saving presence of God in the history of Israel was expressed in the confession: “Yahweh is my strength and my song, he has been my savior” (Ps 118:14). In Christian terms, the only agent and mediator of salvation is Jesus Christ (Heb 5:9; 1 Tim 2:5), the incarnate Son of God, who redeemed all people through his death on the cross and resurrection, because “of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Salvation through the Messiah (God-man) does not only mean social liberation, temporal development, material prosperity, cultural flourishing, moral improvement, technological advancement, or elimination of war, hunger and disease. It also involves, as emphasized by Schillebeeckx, an inexpressible “transcendent surplus” reserved exclusively for God (*God’s eschatological proviso*), impossible for people to produce with their own finite causative powers.⁴⁴ God’s eschatological clause makes the ultimate and complete salvation a reality which is unimaginable, inexpressible and unattainable for people by means of mere political actions and charitable works. In theology, then, an apophatic discourse on salvation is also needed. It protects salvation against trivialization and horizontalization, as well as counteracts the fanaticism of self-appointed political and religious messiahs, ready to implement their Utopian salvation projects by force. The discourse allows us to understand that salvation is essentially connected with God Himself, with a life in the state of friendship and the most perfect unity with the Holy Trinity, with blissful participation in the nature of God, with the development of human personality to the fullness foreseen by the Creator, and with the building of the eternal communion of human persons in God.

Although salvation is closely related to the person, the teaching and the work of Christ, it is not limited to the supernatural, spiritual, and eschatological dimensions. As Tillich and Schillebeeckx rightly observe, it is a reality which is dynamic, developmental and polarized: individual and social, historical and eschatological, mystical and praxeological, fragmentary and total, anthropological and cosmic.⁴⁵ Primarily, salvation includes man in the individual and social dimensions; and secondarily, it involves all organic and inorganic reality. Since the resurrected Lord-Messiah is still the Head of the creation, all reality, says Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, is somehow mysteriously drawn to Him because the exalted Christ is the Omega Point of the universal evolution of the universe.⁴⁶ While appreciating the cosmic dimension of

⁴³ Bartnik, “Medytacja,” 177.

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Christ. The Christian Experience*, 778.

⁴⁵ Nadbrzeżny, *Filozofia zbawienia*, 261–278.

⁴⁶ Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, 70–71.

salvation, one should not forget about its historical aspect, because Christ, the Savior of the world, is also, as Wolfhart Pannenberg emphasizes, the absolute sense of history in which man realizes himself in time and space.⁴⁷

In the perspective of the history of salvation, Christ appears as an active Savior who had already come into the world (kenotic incarnation), still comes (sacramental presence) and will come again (eschatological Parousia). Thanks to the constant coming of the Risen Lord, in a way, from the future to the present, the saving process of universal recapitulation can develop, that is, the unification of everyone and everything in Christ as the Head of the Cosmos. He is the universal Savior both on the level of human history and on the creative plane of the entire universe. In the event of the Incarnation and Redemption, as taught by John Paul II, the Son of God assumed human nature and united himself, in some mysterious, but also real way, with every human being in the history of the world, and then with the entire created cosmos that is a natural environment for people.⁴⁸ People who establish a relationship with the Savior in the micro-history of their lives do not so much change in their material, mental, social or spiritual situation, but change in the personal aspect. They become new creatures in Christ: the adoptive children of God. They receive priestly, prophetic and royal dignity, and become heralds of God in the world: personal signs of His merciful love present in the world. They become heralds of the Good News, and through professional work and parenthood also God's collaborators in the act of continuous creation and sanctification of the world (*creatio continua et sanctificatio mundi*).⁴⁹

Man's encounters with Christ who brings salvation never take place *in abstracto*, but in a particular world full of conflicts, contradictions and contrasts. It is a world in which axiological egalitarianism favors the popularization of Nietzsche's view that evil is God's superstition.⁵⁰ In the context of human anxiety about physical, social and spiritual death, the encounter with the Savior – both in the community of the Church (in the Word of God and in the sacraments) and in an anonymous way beyond the visible boundaries – is presented as a gift and a task coming from God. By being a gift, it frees a person from the illusion of self-salvation. Being a task, it inspires trustful cooperation with the Divine grace in building a civilization of solidarity, forgiveness and fraternity,⁵¹ in accordance with St. Paul's statement that "there is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13).

⁴⁷ See: Gózdź, *Jesus Christus*.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, no. 13.

⁴⁹ Bartnik, "Medytacja," 178.

⁵⁰ Quoted after Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości*, 509.

⁵¹ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 249.

Conclusion

Introduced into soteriological considerations, the concept of anxiety allows us to fully present man as an alienated, dramatic existence, concerned about his own being and aware of various dangers threatening his integrity. Contrary to common understanding, anxiety as an existential mood is not equated with fear, which is a reaction to specific threats that can be identified and at least partially eliminated. Anxiety refers to the totality of the world perceived through the prism of inevitable death. The epiphany function of anxiety is expressed in showing both the contingency, temporality and transience of man (Heidegger), and the powerful possibilities associated with his freedom (Kierkegaard).

Depending on the interpretation, anxiety can lead either to a person adopting an authentic way of being by accepting the inevitability of death, or to man opening himself to the possibility of transcendent salvation. In the latter case, anxious human existence experiences a “breath of hope” which has its deepest source in the inspiring breath of the Paraclete. In the “space of hope” thus created, the fire of the Holy Spirit stands against the flame of despair that threatens the alienated man. Human freedom, on the other hand, marks the battlefield on which the possibility of salvation fights the possibility of damnation, both temporal and eternal. If, at the moment of existential tragedy, the courage to go beyond himself is victorious in man, then the *kairos* of the encounter with Christ the Savior, who is our “advocate with the Father” and “the sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours, but the whole world’s” (1 John 2:1–2), is already approaching.

Translated by Dominika Bugno-Narecka

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